OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

MISS LOLA'S BABY

by Myra Emmons

OF course it was not her own. Shrinking discretion demands that statement at the outset.

Oliver Herford has plaintively said, "Some are born babies, some achieve babies, and some have babies thrust upon them." It is to be regretted that Mr. Herford never illustrated this teeming thought. Fancy and imagination wander joyously among the wistful, googoo-eyed babies and embarrassed, apprehensive adults which his audacious pencil might have evolved. But that has nothing to do with Miss Lola's history.

Miss Lola was not quite certain whether she stood that day, on the plane of achievement or in the valley where responsibilities are thrust. At all times she entertained a kindly and respectful sentiment for babies. In the concrete they merely glimmered on her orbit as luminous, tiny satellites of larger and more definite bodies; but in the abstract Miss Lola had often found babies extremely useful as copy for innocuous little poems, which formed the realities of her existence, and which kindly editors sometimes accepted—referring to them in the sacred seclusion of the editorial office thus: "Steve, I've gotta have another filler. Gimme some o' that stuff o' Miss Lola's."

Miss Lola had a friend. The acquaintance had not been of her seeking. Indeed, nothing was of Miss Lolas seeking. She represented in the scheme of creation merely the receptive attitude of thought which does not seek but is sometimes found. Another girl had found Miss Lola, and had found her extremely useful, as one who moves in a thought world where the material male does not enter, hence one who opposes no fascinating personality nor matrimonial ambitions tending to thwart plans of the mind more acutely feminine. This friend, so-called, Betty Baylis by name, had pursued, from infancy, an undeviating course, which had resulted in an early marriage to the man she selected, nee Ford and christened John, and in prompt maternity.

If Betty had consciously found Miss Lola useful, Miss Lola had, in her turn, unconsciously availed of many of Betty's experiences to meet the demands of the Muses. An impersonal view-point being a literary necessity, as affording a perspective which personal emotions only blur, Miss Lola had reaped a rich harvest from Betty's courtship and marriage; while Betty had regarded with mild amazement and entire lack of comprehension a girl whose sole interest in these vicarious experiences was their adaptability to poetic expression.

Since the advent of little Baylis Rudolfo Ford, Miss Lola's raw material had lavishly increased. Raw material, however, is not infrequently subject to duty. In Miss Lola's case the tax was paid in the form of visits to the sanctuary where Baylis Rudolfo was enshrined. There each of these young feminine minds had secretly entertained toward the other a feeling of wonder; Miss Lola that Betty should seem to find acute delight and an utter abandonment of the intellectual in the process of filling elongated glass bottles with medicated preparations of milk and water, and Betty that Lola seemed to regard infant gurgles, coo-ings, and contortions merely as matter for a note-book, and available for reduction to feet and lines.

On the day when Baylis Rudolfo entered more directly into Miss Lola's experience, it had been arranged that she should remain in the flat with him while Betty should go out to do a bit of shopping. Just how this arrangement had come about Miss Lola could not afterward remember. It seemed to her, later, that Betty must have devised the plan. It was unlike Miss Lola to initiate. Besides, she had no motive, and in investigations of criminality it is customary to consider well the motives which govern the human mind. Betty's motive, though not occult, was indubitable, while Miss Lola felt that not even a mother could accuse her of having sought the care of Baylis Rudolfo, fascinating though he was.

"I'll give him his bottle," Betty had said, lightly, "and put him in his basket. He is almost sure to sleep until I come home, but if he should waken he'll not be a bit of trouble, for him is de goodes' an' bestes' an' sweetes'—isn't him"—here followed maternal rhapsodies which Miss Lola hastily transcribed into her note-book as lending themselves to a future dialect poem—perhaps to be entitled "Under Cuban Skies," or "The Hottentot Babe."

Miss Lola found the quiet of the flat, after Betty's departure, soothing. There had been agitation preceding, as Betty had tried to "straighten up" the place a bit, tossing small pillows into their proper places, tucking discarded bibs, minute hose, and other tiny blankets, picking up rattles from the floor, and wearing apparel into the soiled-clothes basket, folding arranging the rubber menagerie on the shelf where it was accustomed to stand when not being pursued with Rooseveltian energy by its owner during his waking hours. There had been, also, a blur of instructions, beginning "If he should," and including a "then put—" of so varied a nature that Miss Lola had no time nor possible means for arranging them metrically, and thereby reducing them to the level of her comprehension or remembrance.

"If the bell should ring," Betty had said, "it will undoubtedly be the postman, so you'd better go down. There is a check due for John, and I never like to leave such mail in the box. Here are the keys, I'll not need to take them with me, for you can let me in when I return. I will ring one long and one short, so you'll know it's me."

Miss Lola had mentally corrected, "I," and wondered why all young mothers invariably said "me." Could the connection between maternity and incorrect grammar have a bearing on poesy? Ought she to consider this mysterious connection in future verse and embody it? Her delicate and chastened fancy shrank from the inelegant. Perhaps in the dialect verse—

Betty had whirled out and peace had ensued. Baylis Rudolfo slept, as per contract, his apartment being the farthest small room of the flat, opening off the hall, and as remote as the exigencies of flat construction would permit from possible disturbing noises which the family might at any time perpetrate. The quiet seemed almost ominous. Miss Lola felt it freighted with vague responsibilities. There—she had forgotten to ask Betty—

She jumped up, ran to the window, flung it open, and threw her slender body at a perilous angle over the sill. Betty was far up the street, headed for the nearest car line. Miss Lola recovered her balance, of mind as well as body, shuddered to think what a noise she had probably made in raising the window, closed it softly, and listened with apprehension. Baylis Rudolfo made no sound. Miss Lola sat down.

"I suppose," she reflected, "that I really have intelligence. Whatever may happen I shall probably know of something to do, if only to scream for the police. At any rate, nothing is happening at this moment.

The one thing to be feared was the awakening of Baylis Rudolfo. The intelligent action, therefore, seemed to contribute in no way toward this awakening. Miss Lola sank back softly into the cushioned depts of her chair, and took out her note-book. The opportunity for composition was ideal. Not always could she have such stillness. Her home life was at the mercy of others. Her mother was a large, generous, pervasive woman, with a physical tendency to knock over small articles of furniture as she swept majestically about the flat—after the manner described by Dickens—and a mental tendency to demolish whatever train of thought any one else might be entertaining. At her hands Miss Lola's most inspired verses had often been shattered into fragments compared with which the historic condition of Humpty-Dumpty was a beautiful exhibition of cohesiveness.

Miss Lola's fancy paused daintily on the brink of inspiration. So many ideas suggested themselves. "The Sleeping Babe" was a bit trite. Mr. Hotchkiss, editor of The Modern Child, on which Miss Lola had designs, was such a big and burly man that his very thoughts would waken a sleeping babe, and Miss Lola felt certain he could not mentally contemplate one, even in verse. How he could be editor of such a magazine—but this was extraneous to Miss Lola's present field of thought, and she put it aside.

"Wild Babies I Have Known" suggested itself. It was inevitable. Something wild suggests itself to every scribe, especially since Seton made his wild hit which boomeranged around the English-speaking world and returned to him laden with gold. Miss Lola rejected the suggestion, however. The title was the most imitated one extant. Besides, it had a flavor, when applied to babes, of humor, and Miss Lola was not consciously humorous. She was not even remotely aware that the surprising amount of some of the checks sent her for her poems was based on the editor's conception that they were the prize-winning commodity known to the fraternity as "humorous verse."

Miss Lola finally decided on "A Mother's Thoughts When Absent From Her Babe." Miss Lola had never read the early English poets. Neither did she know that a mother's thoughts would be more likely to concentrate on the dread possibility of the baby's milk souring in his tiny stomach than they would be to dwell on his 'rose-scened breath." It is well, however, not to know too many facts when trying to write poetry.

The wings of Pegasus beat the quiet air in gently widening circles, and bore Miss Lola aloft into the blue. Sounds of earth were hushed and objects of sense retreated to a respectful distance. "A Mother's Thoughts" soon embodied themselves into a poem of almost questionable length, the editors having frequently warned Miss Lola that three inches is the best limit for securing acceptance.

The poem finished, Miss Lola felt that no time should be lost in having it reach Mr. Hotchkiss. He had no manuscripts of her in hand, and it was full time for him to begin the arrangement of his next issue. To mail the poem would be to await acceptance or possible rejection. To see Mr. Hotchkiss personally was not always possible, yet frequently it was, and he could always tell at a glance the fate of a manuscript—as far as his own office was concerned. She would take the poem down herself, and at once. In case of rejection she would lose no time in taking it elsewhere.

Hastily she slipped into her wraps, took up the bunch of keys Betty had placed on the taboret, and walked down the hall. At the outer door she paused.

"It certainly seems as if I had forgotten sometime," she murmured. "I have my purse, these are my keys, I have my handkerchief and my manuscript. What else could there be? Mother—yes, mother is out. I must put on the Yale lock. Well, if I have forgotten anything I shall remember it later, and it will simply have to be all right, that's all."

She locked the door carefully, dropped the keys into her hand-bag, and with light, firm, graceful step walked over to the nearest Subway station.

"I'll give him his bottle," Betty said, lightly."

At Brooklyn Bridge she emerged from underground into the upper air of the big part of New York—the inspired and inspiring region of the mighty sky-scrapers, of the open, sunlit space of City Hall Park, of thronging thousands, of the vast energies of newspaper row. Her calm little pulses always quickened in this atmosphere. She had written several poems about the great Down-Town. At the left she turned down a quieter street toward the East River—an ancient street almost forsaken by the tide of traffic; a street abandoned to those commercial activities that do not depend for their existence on the passing throng. Not many women went that way, and the few men she met looked at her with mild curiosity; but Miss Lola was not without her own small independence of thought. She was even a bit of a suffragette, and had written a poem to stir the souls of her valiant sisters in the cause. It began, "Most gentle suffragette, thou are maligned!"

Half-way down the block Miss Lola stopped as if the axe of fate had descended on her head. She did not scream nor faint. She merely stood still. A few workmen paused to look at her, but that was nothing. So light a thing as the alighting of an English sparrow is sufficient to make a New York workman pause for contemplation and rest from his labors. These observers might have looked still more curiously had they known that Miss Lola's heart had stopped beating and then had begun again with a frightful lunge; that she was cold to her finger-tips; that her pompadour stiffened with anguish; that her very toes became rigid; and that she distinctly felt at least one hair turn to a silver-white strak amid its soft, waving, chestnut fellows.

She had forgotten Baylis Rudolfo! He was three miles away, locked into a flat of a steel-ribbed house, alone, inaccessible from without, subject to any catastrophe! She—murderess in embryo—worthless cumberer of the ground—lacking in human instincts—had—well, there were no words to define her crime!

With a mighty effort Miss Lola gathered herself. Then she turned and sped back over her trail at a pace which made the laborers exchange startled glances and drop work for the afternoon to decide what it meant.

Even in her flight Miss Lola gave one backward thought of regret to the child of her own fancy—her poem—which must now wait on the rescue of Baylis Rudolfo. She reflected swiftly that not the least of the merits of mental offspring is the absence of parental responsibility toward them and of exactions on their part calculated to cause their progenitors acute anguish on insufficient grounds. As she whirled swiftly around the corner toward the Subway station she realized that she would be able to add several stanzas descriptive of "Thoughts of a Mother" under distressing circumstances. Or, it might even be a separate poem. "Thoughts of a Murderess"; but the editorial mind of to-day does not incline favorably toward anything which even remotely recognizes crime.

Miss Lola's heart beat suffocatingly. She fumbled her change at the ticket-window, kept the line waiting and received muttered threats from delayed passengers, missed the express and finally secured only standing-room on a local.

To be a poetess is to have imagination, and to have imagination is to suffer. It is idle to say, "Don't worry" to the mind which creates imaginations as naturally and as inevitably as the sun rises. The number of things that might happen to Baylis Rudolfo! He would surely waken. He would inevitably tumble out of his basket head first on to the floor!

"Surely, I have read somewhere," gasped Miss Lola to herself, "that babies' bones are so soft they just fold over on one another when they fall, and that is why they never break." Grammar seemed to have fled. She understood now why Betty said, "It is me." The pleasing consolation of flexible bones was denied Miss Lola. A bleak vision of Johnny Drake, who had had a broken arm at the age of seven months, presented itself to Miss Lola's excited thought. She almost groaned aloud. Eeven failing to break himself, Baylis Rudolfo would creep around the rooms, clutch at table-covers, drag down bric-a-brac—lamps—"Just Heaven!"—bump his nose on sharp corners—scream—oh, how he would scream!—Miss Lola almost gave an imitation—the neighbors would hear him and gather in groups to wonder—perhaps break in the door—no, they could not—oh, last and most agonizing thought—they could not, for the building was absolutely certain to take fire! No matter that it was guaranteed fireproof, and that the janitor was a pattern of watchfulness—it would inevitably take fire this day, at this moment! Betty would return home—she was more than due now—the door would be locked, and her child would be within, while flames leaped and danced toward him. A brave fireman might—oh yes, there was one gleam of hope—he might rescue Baylis Rudolfo. Miss Lola drew a breath of relief. A line of verse shot athwart the gleaming flames—"oh, brawny hero of the dust-blown street"—but Miss Lola put it resolutely aside. Only one thing in life was important now. She must get off at the right Subway station. No enticing fancies of poesy must now be allowed to lure her from that vital act.

She almost fell headlong up the Subway steps, implicating her shins and toes in frightful disaster, but there was no time to consider herself. Dimly she knew that passers-by were gazing curiously at her. She had but one thought for them—that none of them should stop her flight toward Betty's burning flat!

There was no smell of smoke, however. No "flames leaped athwart the gloom" as she mounted the stairs. No calls of brave firemen nor shrill screams of Baylis Rudolfo nor shrieks of neighbors fell on the strained ears of Miss Lola. Betty was not standing at the outer door wringing her hands.

Peace and quiet reigned in the orderly, well-kept apartment-house. Not even a tenant was in sight. With shaking fingers Miss Lola inserted the key in the Yale lock. Could the stillness be yet more ominous than turmoil would have been? The imagination of a poetess is facile, and not to be thwarted by seeming absence of material.

Baylis Rudolfo was sleeping peacefully in his basket. Could it be possible? Trembling and weak, Miss Lola sank into the cushioned chair. With elbow on knee and chin in her hand she contemplated the slumbering infant. The churning of her heart was still appalling, the bruises on her body smarted and ached; but Baylis Rudolfo slept, in his padded basket, and the quiet of a calm, domestic atmosphere brooded over him. Miss Lola marveled as she gazed. So small, so unempowered, yet capable, even in his silent slumber, of causing such vast dismay and consternation!

The bell rang—one long and one short. Betty! Ah, well, all was well. Collecting herself and assuming a lightsome poise, Miss Lola reached the door, though in the process she interviewed each wall a number of times.

"The baby! He's all right?" gasped Betty, with the unreasonable solicitude of young mothers, and brushing hastily past Miss Lola.

"Now, what could have happened to him?" exclaimed Miss Lola, availing of poetic license and steadying herself by the wall as she returned to the living-room meekly in the wake of Betty.

"Why, of course, nothing, my dear, with you here," murmured Betty, her face smothered in Baylis Rudolfo. Then, as she gaily tossed aside her wraps, her gaze fell on Miss Lola's face.

"You look a bit pale, though," she said. "I suppose you felt nervous, taking care of a baby for the first time. Let's have some tea."

"It is something of a strain," admitted Miss Lola, guardedly; and later she drank three cups of tea.

When her poem, "The Lost Child," was published, Betty praised Miss Lola for the first time. Previously Betty had been wont to regard the poems with perfunctory interest, if any.

"It's wonderful how you can tell, Lola," said Betty. "I am sure I should feel just that way if anything should happen to Baylis Rudolfo."

One of the Dangers of the Road.

HOW IT WAS.

THE train was approaching the little Southern town where Blithers was to lecture that night, when it suddenly flashed across his mind that he had not made any inquiry as to the hotel accommodations of the place. A reference to the hotel-book on the train brought no light to bear upon the subject, Mifflebury not even being mentioned in its pages, and what was worse, none of the train officials seemed to know anything about their quality, except the porter, and he was decidedly non-committal at first.

"Yassir," he said, "I been to Mifflebоyg, suh. One o' mah wives was bohn at Mifflebоyg, suh."

"Well, is there a hotel there?" asked Blithers.

"Yassir, dey's a hotel dar, suh," the porter answered. "Dey suttinly is dat," he added, with an ominous chuckle.

"Well, John," said Blithers, "I don't want to go to the worst hotel, of course."

"Naw, suh, I don't reckon you does, suh," rejoined the porter, his smile endangering the back of his neck. "Dat's de Brackenbrush House, suh."

"What is?" demanded Blithers.

"De woyst hotel in Mifflebоyg, suh," returned the ported. "Golly! I sometimes t'ink de Brackenbrush is de woyst hotel in de woyld."

"Well," smiled Blithers, "there's so much gained. It is something to know what to avoid. And now that you've told me which is the wrost, here's a quarter for telling me which is the best."

"De bestest?" repeated the darky, pocketing the quarter.

"The very bestest," said Blithers.

John scratched his head for a moment as though puzzled for the answer, and then he spoke slowly.

"Well, suh," he said, "I reckon dat's—dat's de Brackenbrush, too, suh."

"What's that?" cried Blithers, shrilly. It really looked as if this son of Ham were trifling with him.

"De Brackenbrush, suh—I says de Brackenbrush is de best hotel in Mifflebоyg, suh," said the darky.

"But, you idiot," retorted Blithers, his face getting red with wrath, "you just said the Brackenbrush was the worst."

"Yassir, dat's de fact," returned John. "It suttinly am de very woyst there ever was."

"Look here, porter," put in Blithers, coldly, "what do you think you are doing to me, anyhow? How in thunder can the Brackenbrush be the worst hotel and the best hotel at the same time?"

"Why, hit's becuz, boss, you see de Brackenbrush is de only hotel in de place, suh."